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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
NARRATIVE FOR THE FILM,
"THE TROUT LAKE CREE"

by



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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
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The undersigned certify that they have read,
and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for
acceptance, a thesis entitled Narrative for the Film,
"The Trout Lake Cree" submitted by Gene Gregoret in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts.

PREFACE

The text presented here represents the narrative accompanying a fifty-eight minute, black and white film entitled The Trout Lake Cree. The film documents basic economic activities in a northern Alberta Cree settlement, including the influence of the Roman Catholic mission on the livelihood of the Indians, and in particular, the role played by hunting and fishing in the subsistence pattern. The community is comprised of about twenty-five families plus five members of the mission.

Research and filming in this area was conducted over a two-year period, primarily during the summer months of 1968 and 1969. In total, nearly 9,000 feet of film was shot, of which some 2,100 feet was incorporated into the film after editing was finalized.

In many films of a documentary nature success is often determined by the effectiveness of the narration and how well it complements visual data. The narration is not only significant because it supplies information otherwise unavailable in the cine record, but when carefully prepared, it is a key determinant of continuity in the film, and more often than not the script serves as a blueprint for the selection and arrangement of film sequences when editing begins. Just as important, the narrative can be used as a device to heighten interest in the film by introducing melancholy, humour or dramatic tension into certain sequences.

Needless to say a good script demands considerable planning, and many problems related to synchronization and timing must be overcome before the film emerges with an appropriate blend of visual and audio components.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks are due to many at the University of Alberta. I am especially grateful to Dr. Ruth Gruhn whose interest in the project and confidence in my abilities culminated in sponsorship of the Canada Council grant. Also I wish to express my appreciation for the assistance and encouragement offered by my thesis committee as well as other members of the department. In addition, David Sands and the staff of the Motion Picture Division of University of Alberta's Photographic Services have helped me over many problems in making of the film.

I am indebted to the people of Trout Lake along with Father Roger Vandersteene and others at the mission for their kindness and cooperation during the months of filming and research. In particular, Father Vandersteene's knowledge of Cree customs and language was a great asset.

I wish to extend a special word of thanks to my wife Michele for all the help she has given me. Her familiarity with techniques of television production made her criticism and suggestions most valuable, and her patience and constant encouragement enabled me to surmount many difficult moments during production of the film.

REEL 1

Over 70,000 Indians live within the borders of Alberta. As traditions fade, most of these people are faced with the problem of how to meet demands of modern society without completely denying their cultural heritage.

Some have adapted to the white man's world by overcoming countless obstacles. Their efforts stand as a reminder that the Indian cannot be rashly judged as lazy, backward or irresponsible.

For others, the transition has been a difficult one. Disenchanted with conditions in rural settlements, many Indians have turned to the cities in hopes of discovering a better way of life. But very often these hopes are shattered.

There are still other Indian groups who are clinging to a life-style that has been inherited from their forefathers....

This is a film about such a people and how they make a living during part of the year.

TITLE APPEARS

CREDITS APPEAR

MAP FADES IN

The small Cree settlement of Trout Lake lies in a remote part of northern Alberta's vast muskeg region. In relation to the provincial capital at Edmonton, it is more than 200 air miles to the north, at a point midway between the fifty-sixth and fifty-seventh parallels. Although there are several Cree communities in this area, the closest town of major economic importance is Slave Lake. Both supplies and mail are channelled northward from this center.

MAP FADES OUT

As yet civilization has not made a profound impact on the settlement. Even now industrial development is non-existent; standard currency is still not as popular as credit notes or simple barter, and there is neither electricity nor a road serving Trout Lake. The only means of reaching the community by land is over hazardous bush trails.

Along with the transistor radio and the forestry communication system, charter air service provides the only rapid and direct contact with the outside.

The most substantial foothold of white man's culture came with the establishment of a Roman Catholic mission in 1958. But unlike many endeavors of the white man in the North, the mission has adjusted to the Indian and has sought to understand his ways.

The name synonymous with Trout Lake is that of Father Roger Vandersteene, founder of the mission. From the time he left Belgium 23 years ago, he has lived and worked among the Woodland Cree and has come to understand Cree customs and language with recognized authority. In his work he has been guided by the belief that in order for new developments to be effective the Indian's culture and traditions must be respected:

10 sec. VOICE OVER -- FATHER VANDERSTEENE

You know, I don't say the Indians shouldn't take anything new, they should take all the new they can possibly digest -- but they're the important people, not the invention!

From the standpoint of the Indians however, it is difficult to say whether they perceive the role of the mission as a helpful addition to their lives or merely tolerate its presence as a gradual step toward more imposing changes. Wherever the truth lies, the Indians frequent the mission area constantly, and demands on Father Vandersteene seem never-ending.

20 sec. PAUSE

For some members of the mission the work is equally engrossing, and challenges often arise which call for patience, understanding and...determination in the face of obstacles.

One of the mission's most important contributions involves efforts to create employment following trapping season. During a good season of trapping a man can earn over \$3,500, making this the dominant source of revenue. But trapping is restricted to winter months and without the help of the mission there would be few opportunities to supplement such earnings.

Jobs are directed toward community improvements as well as mission requirements. These men are engaged in the latter task.

After the wood has been delivered to the mission, another team of workers cut and chop the logs into appropriate size for firewood.

There is an attempt to provide both men and boys with work, but preference is given to adult males with families. Youths however, are capable workers. As teenagers, most can handle an axe as well as their fathers.

Activities at this site offer a good example of community-directed employment. The project was initiated to improve a roadway through a section of muskeg.

Construction is simple but effective. In areas of softest muskeg, rocks are used to form the foundation. The remaining sections are built up with alternate layers of poplar logs and sod until the deck is level with solid ground on either extremity of the structure.

Problems related to actual construction are few, but the work habits of the Indians are such that work tends to proceed at an unpredictable rate. In the eyes of government and industry the Indian's approach to work leaves much to be desired.

On the other hand, Father Vandersteene believes that most whites develop unfavourable attitudes because they fail to recognize that an Indian's outlook on life may be shaped by a different set of values and a different concept of time.

His own experience has taught him that it is difficult to organize bush Indians into a rigid work schedule when normal activities of such people are not regulated on a 9 to 5 basis. In a community of this kind, time is of minor importance as long as present or prevailing needs are satisfied.

The rate of progress can also be hampered by numerous work breaks. It is not unusual that part of a work day is given over to more leisurely pursuits, because ordinarily, large gatherings are formed for the purpose of discussion or occur in response to some festive event. Hence, work involving a large group of men creates a similar situation in the sense that it affords an excellent opportunity for friendly gossip, exchanging local news, or perhaps even arranging the next moose hunt.

But despite irregular progress the roadway was ready for use within a three-week period.

Interaction with the mission has not greatly altered the Cree's basic mode of existence. Traditions are not so easily forsaken, nor should they be according to Father Vandersteene:

19 sec. VOICE OVER -- FATHER VANDERSTEENE

Some of the values they're still hanging on to, we're trying to discover them. And maybe the healthiest thing they can give to Canada...our Indians in the bush...is by holding on to their own values. That's the best thing they can ever do for Canada, hold on!

The coming of summer brings with it the reminder that once again canoes will be repaired, moose hides scraped, and teepees erected.

As the 60's draw to a close, Trout Lake remains one of the very few places in Alberta where teepees are considered practical as a means of shelter in summer.

For better or worse, the 25 or so families in Trout Lake are holding on -- trying to preserve a measure of independance -- a certain detachment from the white man that comes with months on the trapline, or weeks at summer fishing sites, or days on the trail of moose. More than anything else, hunting, fishing and trapping regulate life in the community.

Some of the food is bought at the local store. Items such as flour, tea, sugar and canned food, along with vegetables from scant garden plots, account for nearly half the diet. The remainder of the food supply is obtained by hunting and fishing, making these activities important throughout the year.

The greatest emphasis is placed on fishing. Fish is the mainstay of the diet and is needed to furnish dog food as well.

At least one male member of each household is called upon to supply the family with fish. In the Nos-ki-yay family this task has fallen to Pat, who is the eldest unmarried male.

Like most fishermen he sets out in the morning to check his nets. Today, he has the assistance from one of his brothers, Jean-Marie, who is awaiting the day when he too will own a boat and motor.

There is an ever-present threat that winds and fog can render the lake hazardous for any kind of boat.

When morning fog obscures shoreline references, even experienced fishermen such as Pat have difficulty in locating the floats of their nets. It could mean a lengthy search should the fog persist.

As far back as the old people can recall, this lake has been known as Na-may-koos-sa-gi'eegan, the Cree word for Trout Lake. More recently, the provincial government decided that the name of Graham Lake would be preferable. The Indians disregard the new name, but the change may be justified because now the lake is depleted of lake trout. Over the years, periods of extensive fishing by commercial fishing companies have hastened the disappearance of trout.

Presently, the Cree rely heavily on white fish, while other species including northern pike, pickerel and suckers are of secondary importance.

Pat and his brother dock the boat with a catch of about fifty fish taken from two nets. Some fishermen are equipped with just a single net, but when the family is large, or is extended into a larger unit through marriages, the additional expense of another net is warranted. The use of two nets also increases the possibility of returning with a surplus of fish. At such times a man may be able to sell part of his catch to others in the community.

The fishermen's final task of the morning is to see that the dogs are fed. For this purpose, northern pike or suckers are generally selected.

Preparing fish for cooking and smoking is left to the women. Fish which are cut into fillets will be smoked, the remaining fish will be boiled for immediate consumption.

Much as Jean-Marie is learning to set fish nets, his sister Juliette is learning the skills that are expected of her in adulthood.

20 sec. PAUSE

It is common practice to hang fish in teepees for smoking, however some families prefer a separate teepee-like structure for this purpose, especially if great quantities of fish are to be cured.

Gradually there is a shift to other chores around the house. For the woman these are many, ranging from baking bannock to tanning hides. Her responsibilities are such that she has very little free time, particularly if she has a large family. Her work day is truly a long one even though she receives assistance.

On the other extreme, there is always time for play for some members of the family.

And Jean-Marie is always willing to have his attention diverted by a visit from a friend.

Bicycles are a novelty in the community, but it seems they are never in proper working order. A combination of rugged terrain and hard use affords the aspiring mechanic plenty of work.

There is another form of fishing that is not as productive as that carried out on the lake, but usually it is much more enjoyable.

In the early part of summer when rivers and creeks are swarming with migrating fish, the boys in the settlement try their luck at snaring pike and suckers. The technique simply calls for a long pole with a wire loop at one end, but success is measured in terms of correct timing and quick reflexes.

Snaring fish is a pleasant pastime in itself, but the real fun begins when some of the boys decide to create a little more excitement.

In the daily course of events play is given ample opportunity to develop. It is not until the child approaches his teens is there a noticeable shift in activities. At this point his contribution to the welfare of the family assumes greater significance.

In the transition to adult status, girls are assigned an increasing share of household duties, whereas for the adolescent male, the problem of supplying food for the family becomes more and more of a concern.

It is not likely that a boy will kill a moose until his late teens, but in the interim, he is expected to provide small game for the table. This includes ducks, grouse, and in particular, rabbits.

Almost every boy has an area near the settlement where he sets out a series of 10 to 15 rabbit snares. These he inspects at least every second day. If he is lax in this duty it is certain that Canada jays or crows will make short work of the trapped animals.

There is much to learn before his elders consider him capable of hunting bigger game.

Hunting large animals is the responsibility of adults. Bear hunting ranks a distant second in importance to moose, but has several distinctive features. Not only do more beliefs and legends surround this animal -- no doubt sparked by a certain element of fear -- but two methods of hunting bear are employed.

The usual way is of course with rifle, very often as an incidental part of moose hunting. The other way, though less common, is by means of snares. This technique is demonstrated by George Alluk, a man highly respected for his knowledge of the bush and his abilities as oma-chay-ou, or hunter.

An area with a stream or creek is typical of the sites chosen for setting snares, because the availability of food and water increases the likelihood that bear trails will occur.

Bears tend to follow habitual routes when proceeding alongside streams, however it takes a trained eye to recognize these paths and even greater powers of observation to ascertain whether bears are currently visiting the locality.

George notes many details that indicate evidence of bears: blades of grass bent a certain way, broken branches, claw marks on trees and tufts of hair caught in branches are signs left by bears. After a quick and systematic survey, the placement of snares begins.

A loop of heavy gauge wire is tied to a sapling, or else a pole set into the ground. In either case the idea is to allow the ensnared bear some freedom of movement, thus preventing him from choking to death. But from the viewpoint of the hunter this procedure involves an added risk because he must return to face a very angry bear. Yet the Indians do not seem overly disturbed by this potential danger.

Once the snare is arranged, bait in the form of raw fish is placed further down the trail and left to rot. According to the Indians, the stronger the smell, the more effective is the bait.

Bait is not always used, but it does increase the chances of success.

Still further down the trail another snare is set. When this is completed George will then have two snares on the same trail -- each situated about 100 feet on either side of the bait.

Now all that is needed is the bear!

At another time, George does indeed succeed in getting a bear, and without the trouble of setting up snares.

Musqua, or bear, has always held an important place in Indian mythology. Each kill is considered a gift from the Great Bear Spirit, and usually the claws or head were left at the kill site as a sacrifice to this Spirit. Similarly, the heart, and sometimes liver and kidneys, were first to be removed and eaten as further acknowledgment of respect.

In the Indian belief system, this act was a form of holy communion directed to the Bear Spirit. Eating of the heart indicated acceptance of the Spirit's presence and power.

The ritual has not altogether vanished in isolated areas, but the Indians rarely discuss it with nonIndians.

The next day George will be back with his son for the rest of the meat.

REEL 2

Until quite recently, the survival of Cree families in the region of Trout Lake was closely linked to the availability of moose. The moose provided food, clothes and tools, hence very little of the animal was discarded.

The Indians do not depend on moose to the same extent today, nonetheless the well-being of the community is still influenced by the prevalence of moose.

There is no rigid pattern or procedure followed when it comes to moose hunting. Some expeditions are planned well in advance, others begin with just a few hours of preparation. Similarly, a man may set out alone or in the company of relatives or neighbours.

Vital Cardinal's hunting party will have four members. Accompanying Vital is his 17-year-old son Louis, a neighbour, William Beaver -- who has arranged to meet the group the following day -- and unexpectedly, Vital's youngest son Oliver. Rarely are boys his age given this opportunity.

The first morning on the trail begins with the arrival of William Beaver. After a quick breakfast, gear is repacked and the search for moose is under way.

The final destination of the hunting party is not known

precisely. Tentatively it is set for an area of lakes about 20 miles east of the settlement. This distance is considerable when the journey is through dense bush and recurring muskeg, making it necessary to rest the horses from time to time.

At this camp Vital is preparing rabbit for the noon-day meal.

Despite the trend to motor boats, it is not difficult to realize why the Indians retain the canoe for use in hunting. It is light, it is ideal in shallow water or where weeds are abundant, and most important, it creates a minimum of noise.

With no sign of moose at the first lake, the hunters move on. The second lake looks more promising. Evidence of numerous fresh tracks raises hopes that there will be moose meat over the campfire tonight. And indeed, the hunters are not to be denied this time.

(RIFLE SHOT)

The moose is not as large as they would like, but at least the trip has not been in vain.

Butchering moose requires an experienced hand. Vital, for example, severs the head by making the cut just at the right place. His knife passes cleanly through the neck without obstruction from bone. The rest of the carcass is handled with equal skill. In particular, care has to be taken in removing the hide as unintentional cuts into the skin reduce its usefulness.

Almost every part of the animal is eaten or utilized in some manner. The head is of special value. The ears, eyes, nose and tongue are eaten and greatly appreciated, on the other hand the brain is used in tanning. Internal organs, including the heart, liver, kidneys and some intestines are also considered delicacies, as is the marrow extracted from bone in lower parts of the leg. One thing is clear, waste is at a minimum...even bones have use as dog food. Ironically, the one item that Indians do leave behind is what the white hunters seem to prize the most -- the antlers!

Perhaps there is no one hungrier than little Oliver. It appears that he has already selected his supper.

As customary, those involved in the hunt have first choice of the delicacies. Their reward is well deserved after hours of hard work. And a fire crackling under thick

chunks of fresh moose meat is always a pleasant way to round out the day.

20 sec. PAUSE

During the return trip no further attempt to kill moose will be made unless moose are sighted on the trail or near camp.

The outcome of a hunt is of interest to everybody, and in a short time the news spreads throughout the community. Details of the hunt are also of interest because the estimated numbers of moose and conditions in the area help other men decide when and where they will hunt.

In order to make the division of moose as fair as possible, parts are shared in such a way that the head goes to one family and the hide to another. In this case it was decided that William would take home the hide.

The sequel to a successful moose hunt involves a series of activities leading to the tanning of the hide and the eventual production of leather goods. The process of tanning comprises several stages beginning with preparations of the skin for cleaning. For Christine Noski'yay and other

women in the settlement, summer is a time when many hours are spent working on the hides.

Generally it takes two weeks to process a hide properly, which means it must pass through seven basic stages before it becomes serviceable as leather.

The initial steps are most difficult from the standpoint of manual labour. When the hide is secured to the frame or stretcher it is ready for fleshing, which consists of removing the fatty substance from the inner part of the skin by means of a bone tool. The tool is made from the metatarsal, or lower hind leg of the moose. A cutting edge is produced by bevelling one end of the bone at a 45 degree angle to form a chisel-like point. The edge is then serrated or notched to render it more effective.

Fleshing will occupy Melanie Houle and her daughter Marie-Louise for most of the day.

The following day the other side is worked. To remove the coarse hair, a metal bladed tool referred to as an adze is used.

The need to clean the skin soon after the moose is

brought home coincides with the task of cutting the meat into strips for smoking. Inasmuch as both demand prompt attention, women are confronted by an exceedingly busy work schedule at this time.

But once these chores are out of the way, progress on the hide varies according to the demands for leather and the amount of other work around the house.

The Indian has capitalized on the resources of the natural environment in many different ways. One of the most interesting examples is the use of moose brain in tanning. Long ago native peoples discovered that a raw-hide treated with a solution of brain, fat and water would swell and become softer. This process proved ideal as a method of readying the hide for smoking.

The mixture is prepared by boiling the ingredients for about twenty minutes or until a paste is formed. It is cooled and then applied to the hide. The hide is later folded into a small bundle and left in that condition for three to four days.

When the hide is unfolded it is placed on the drying rack for about a half day. This is the first smoking.

Following this, the skin is soaked for about 36 hours...

first in warm water, then cold. An hour or so before it is removed from the water the hide is pulled, squeezed and twisted to enhance its suppleness.

The next problem is to remove a maximum amount of water from the skin. This is accomplished by wringing it out on a tree stump or crossbar somewhere near the house. The job most certainly calls for two people.

The sixth step involves a combination of drying and stretching. Again, two individuals are essential for this activity.

To ensure that the hide dries slowly and uniformly it is waved over a fire of low intensity. This is the only occasion an open flame is used in connection with tanning.

As the moisture begins to leave the hide it has to be stretched at regular intervals so that shrinkage is kept at a minimum.

The procedures at this stage are most critical. If carried out skillfully, the hide is rendered to a consistent thickness. It is mainly on this quality that a woman's work is judged.

A light scraping usually follows to eliminate any rough areas.

The final smoking is a day-long process that requires close supervision to see that smoke is abundant and no flame appears. Because a large amount of smoke is necessary, specially selected dry rot is used. Smoking in this manner preserves the skin so that it is protected against insects and vermin. Tanning of the hide comes to an end when it turns a characteristic yellow colour...it is then leather.

Leather has many applications, including the creation of jackets, gloves, rifle cases and dog harnesses. However the greatest demand for leather is for use in making moccasins. Not even a good pair of moccasins can withstand much more than five months of wear under conditions imposed by brush, muskeg, mud or snow. And children's footwear is replaced even more frequently.

A pair of moccasins can be made within a couple of hours, but if they are to be adorned with beads or embroidery it will take an extra two or three days, depending on detail.

If beads are not available at the local store, moccasins will be embroidered. But generally speaking, beads are preferred for decoration.

Moccasins not too different from those Melanie makes

for her family have been part of Cree traditions long before the European set foot in the New World. But now, a life-style that has persisted over the centuries is drawing to a rapid end, and has already eroded away in most parts of Canada.

20 sec. PAUSE

The transistor radio is but one indicator of changes to come in Trout Lake.

PAUSE UNTIL CUE IN

In all likelihood, Melanie's little granddaughter will not wear moccasins as an adult. Indians admit that before long few will care to hunt moose and the need to tan hides will have passed.

PAUSE UNTIL CUE IN

Unknown to these children there is a new world dawning for them. It comes with new sets of values of which the most esteemed is change. They will learn that the future is the key, not the past.

PAUSE UNTIL CUE IN

Thus, children of this age probably represent the last generation of Cree to play in a teepee or be rocked to sleep under its canvas.

To them goes the sad distinction of witnessing the involuntary demise of their culture. Thereafter it will live in books and memory only.

PAUSE UNTIL CUE IN

The government has promised these youths a bright future if they learn the ways of the white man. Hesitantly, they struggle to please their unseen benefactor, unaware of the multitude of problems now confronting the outside world.

10 sec. PAUSE

Changes are approaching. Already there are plans to build a road into Trout Lake, and the school will soon have a power plant to generate electricity. There is also talk of establishing a fish processing plant and perhaps government sponsored housing is a possibility.

PAUSE UNTIL CUE IN

Uncertain of their future, the Cree exist as they know how with what they have. But they are no longer masters in a land the Great Manitou gave to them.

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